



Incidental Learning

[Excerpted from Buchanan, L. et al. (2015). [Exploration and responsive environments](#) slide presentation. In National Center on Deaf-Blindness, Open hands, open access: Deaf-blind intervener learning modules – Concept development and responsive environments.]

Much of what we all know, we did not gain as a result of being taught, but through experiential or incidental learning—learning that takes place without any intent to learn. For most of us, what we understand about trees, the sky, and what’s in the refrigerator, we know from our experiences with these things.

Consider the girl in this photo walking down a path. No one is teaching her about the size and shape of the trees. No one has to tell her that the lovely smell in the air is from their blossoms.



Perhaps a butterfly flits by. She learns much about how it flies and its vibrant colors just by looking at it. She knows from observation that some butterflies are quite large and others very small. No one taught the girl about butterflies and trees.

Now imagine the same sidewalk, the same trees, the same birds and butterflies. But this time the information the girl receives about her surroundings is incomplete because of vision and hearing loss. A butterfly brushing by is startling. The screech of a hawk is unsettling. And when she walks in the shadow of trees, she doesn’t know why she feels a chill.



RESPONSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Because of combined vision and hearing loss, students who are deaf-blind do not have the same opportunities as many other children for incidental or experiential learning. Their perception of what is happening around them is initially limited to what is very close to their own bodies. They may have little knowledge of the things that happen at a distance, beyond their reach and the information they do receive may be incomplete or distorted (think of a radio that is tuned slightly off the station frequency).

How can we compensate for the limited access that students with deaf-blindness have to incidental learning? We do it by creating environments that encourage exploration and active learning.

Responsive environments encourage exploration by enhancing opportunities for experience-based learning. They allow children to be aware that they have control over their surroundings and can influence what happens around them. Key features include:

- Objects that are meaningful and interesting to a child
- Places that feel safe to explore
- Adult partners who are skilled at interacting with children who are deaf-blind